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Becoming the Garos of Bangladesh: Policies of Exclusion and the Ethnicisation of a 'Tribal' Minority

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relation between state policies and ethnicisation in the borderland of Bengal. On the basis of a case study of the lowland Garos of Bangladesh, the paper argues that attempts by the successor states of Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh to 'other', and even 'exclude', the Garos have significantly impacted on Garo self-perception and organisation, resulting in the formation of a close-knit ethnic community. The paper focuses on three twentieth-century episodes in the lives of the lowland Garos. The first is the 1936 British administrative reorganisation of Mymensingh District which resulted in the emergence of a notion of a separate Garo homeland in Bengal. The second is the mass exodus of Garos across the international border into the Indian hills which took place in 1964. This traumatic experience pushed the Garos to unify. The third is the Independence War of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh. All three episodes are directly related to state policies which excluded the Garos (as well as the neighbouring minorities) from the dominant discourse of Bengali/Bangladeshi citizenship. The paper concludes that the Garos of Bangladesh are a close-knit ethnic community—not in spite of these state attitudes—but rather as an outcome of them.

Introduction

'What do you mean, there were no tribes in Africa?' The distinguished Africanist Donald R. Wright often heard this retort from students taking his course on pre-colonial African history.¹ They would feel dissatisfied with his claim that ethnicity

¹ Donald R. Wright, "'What do you mean, there were no tribes in Africa?': Thoughts on Boundaries and Related Matters in Precolonial Africa", in *History in Africa*, Vol.XXVI (1999), pp.409–26.

was not a deeply-rooted cultural characteristic of Africans but a colonial construction; that Europeans had based their ideas of African tribalism on their own preconceptions and cultural backgrounds rather than on historical evidence; and that historical sources about pre-colonial history were far too limited to substantiate any claim that African tribes are remnants of a distant past.

I refer to the reaction of Wright's students and to his arguments about the scarcity of historical evidence as they show certain noteworthy similarities with my own research experiences with the Garos of Bangladesh. In spite of the paucity of (pre-colonial) historical sources, the suggestion that these hill people have always been divided into clearly-distinct tribal or ethnic communities is commonly (and uncritically) deemed a historical fact. Such a conceptualisation of the past could be partially explained by the traditions of knowledge-production on the region and its tribal or upland populations. In South Asia, uplanders or tribes typically belong to the realm of anthropologists, whose primary concerns are "living cultures" of specified populations and their life-ways in locally delimited habitats', and not long-term historical developments.² Yet this lack of historical knowledge is also related to the absence of any sense of urgency for an historical perspective.³ In South Asia, mainstream notions of 'tribe' render historical scrutiny redundant, since dominant stereotypical ideas commonly imply that 'tribal' populations have no relevant histories anyway.⁴

This paper focuses on one such 'tribe', the Garos of Bangladesh. From 1993 to 2000 I carried out research among this rather small community of so-called tribal lowlanders. From 1994 to 1995, I worked closely together with Suborno Chisim, a young Garo from Bangladesh, who acted as my research assistant, translator and key informant. During that year, we carried out all field research together.⁵ My project was to examine the process of identity/ethnicity formation among these

² Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p.13.

³ See for example H.C. Sharma, anthropologist of Northeast India, who comments that 'until now very little has been done in the area of archaeological research though the prehistoric sites that have been discovered so far in this region would justify this'. H.C. Sharma, 'Prehistoric Archeology of the North-East', in T.B. Subba and G.C. Ghosh (eds), *The Anthropology of North-East India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), p.12.

⁴ Willem van Schendel pointed out that South Asian tribes are often depicted as if they share a number of 'essentially tribal characteristics' that are fundamentally different from, even opposite to, 'civilised society'. Such characteristics include innocence, childish behaviour, primitive culture and the absence of any noteworthy history. See Willem van Schendel, 'The Invention of the "Jummas": State Formation and Ethnicity in Southeastern Bangladesh,' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.XXVI, no.1 (Feb. 1992), pp.95–128.

⁵ I first visited Bangladesh in November 1993. During that visit I met Suborno Chisim who became my research assistant during my one-year field research from March 1994 to March 1995. His contribution was vital to this research project. When I use 'we/us' in the text I refer to him and me. I myself remain entirely accountable for this text.

Garos. The scarcity and nature of the existing historical data (note that any written documentation by the Garos themselves is virtually non-existent) proved a serious limitation to my study—but did not render it impossible. Through a careful combination of a wide variety of documentation (by administrators, researchers, missionaries, etc.) and oral history, I was able to study how these Garos have come to constitute the clearly-distinct and self-conscious ethnic community they are today. Elsewhere I distinguish several different but intricately interwoven factors that contributed to this process of identity-formation or ethnicisation.⁶ These include the influence of colonial discourse of tribe, administrative strategies to identify, categorise, and govern the people of British India, the role of missionaries and religious conversion, the trans-national discourse and movement of indigenous peoples, and the emerging social, economic, political and psychological needs that encouraged the Garos to unite.

While Wright uses the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘ethnicity’ more or less interchangeably,⁷ I make a clear distinction between the two. Many scholars of South Asia have continued to use tribe either as an analytical category or simply as a label for certain communities or movements, even though the term ‘tribe’ often carries notions of primitivity and backwardness.⁸ Moreover, so-called tribal studies often concentrate on ‘tribal culture’ instead of historical processes of group formation. Contemporary conceptualisations of ethnicity on the other hand assume a dynamic and relational perspective on group identities and inter-group relations. They concentrate on the social interaction by which cultural differences between groups are communicated and the context in which these interactions take place, rather than on cultural particularities as such.⁹

I primarily concentrate though on the relationship between state policies and ethnicisation. It is my contention that the policies of the successive states of East Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh to ‘other’, ‘exclude’, and/or even evict the Garos from the state and/or the nation, have significantly impacted on Garo self-perception, awareness and organisation, resulting in the articulation of ethnic boundaries between the Garos and others and the under-communication of differences

⁶ Ellen Bal, *‘They Ask If We Eat Frogs’: Social Boundaries, Ethnic Categorisation, and the Garo People of Bangladesh* (Delft: Eburon, 2000). A revised and updated edition is forthcoming in 2007 entitled *‘They Ask If We Eat Frogs: Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh* (Singapore: ISEAS).

⁷ Wright, “What do you mean, there were no tribes in Africa?”, pp.409–26.

⁸ Cf. Crispin Bates, “‘Lost Innocents and the Loss of Innocence’: Interpreting Adivasi Movements in South Asia”, in R.H. Barnes, Andrew Gray and Benedict Kingsbury (eds), *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* (Ann Arbor: The Association for Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1995), p.103; and Susana B.C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi & Newberry Park, Cal.: Sage Publications, 1992), p.28.

⁹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London and Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2nd ed., 2002), p.58.

amongst them. I argue, in other words, that the present-day Garos of Bangladesh do not form a closely-knit ethnic community *in spite of* nineteenth- and twentieth-century state attitudes towards East Bengal's minorities, but rather *because of them*.¹⁰

Here I build my argument around three significant episodes in the lives of the Bangladeshi Garos, in which state interventions and positions *vis-à-vis* the Garos influenced their self-awareness and organisation. The first event was the colonial creation of the Partially Excluded Area in 1936 (more commonly known as the PEA) in the northernmost part of Mymensingh District, bordering the Garo Hills. In the minds of the lowland Garos the PEA came to stand for a separate Garo 'homeland' in Bengal. The second event was the turbulent exodus of the Garos (and other minorities) from East Pakistan in 1964. According to several informants this experience was the turning-point in their history—the one that prompted the Garos to unite. Others referred to it as the dividing line between good times and bad. The third episode I will treat is the 1971 Liberation War and the ensuing birth of Bangladesh. Initially the foundation of Bangladesh as a new nation-state seemed to hold out the promise of inclusion to all as equal citizens. However the Garos soon discovered that, once again, they did not comply with the dominant notion of what constituted ideal-type citizens.

First, however, some background on the Garos of Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh: who are they, and why should we distinguish them from the hill Garos living in the Indian state of Meghalaya?

The Lowland Garos of Bangladesh

While largely absent from the national history of Bangladesh as actors (rather than as exotic objects), I could hardly maintain that the Garos are a new topic of interest. Since John Eliot's encounter with the 'Garrows' in 1788–1789 'as the first European who has travelled among them', numerous books and articles about the Garos have been published.¹¹ These publications, however, mainly deal with the uplanders

¹⁰ This is no novel argument as such. However for the Garos of Bangladesh, no other empirical analysis of this process has ever been undertaken. Cf. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Abhijit Dasgupta and Willem van Schendel, who underline the necessity to analyse the role of states in the marginalisation of communities and ensuing ethnic innovation. See 'Introduction', in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Abhijit Dasgupta and Willem van Schendel (eds), *Bengal. Communities, Development and States* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1995), pp.1–17.

¹¹ John Eliot, 'Observations on the Inhabitants of the Garrow Hills. Made during a Public Deputation in the Years 1788 and 1789', in *Asiatic Researches*, Vol.III (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications [1794] 1979), pp.17–37. Sipra Sen gives some 582 references on the Garos in her extensive, but by far not exhaustive, bibliography. Sipra Sen, *The Tribes of Meghalaya* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985), pp.14–62.

living in Meghalaya, in the district named Garo Hills. The much smaller number of lowland Garos of East Bengal have rarely been studied.¹² Nonetheless for various reasons these lowland Garos have their own history(ies). The international border that has officially separated the lowlanders from the hill Garos since the Partition of India and the formation of Pakistan in 1947 reflected real differences between the uplanders and plains dwellers. Major A. Playfair, who published the first ethnography on the Garos in 1909, distinguished 'those who inhabit the Garo Hills district' from 'those who reside in the plains and are scattered over a very wide area of country'.¹³ And the anthropologist Chie Nakane also believes that the division into hill and plains Garos represented a prime division of the Garos:

The Garo of the plains have become more sophisticated by closer contacts with the lowland peoples and many of them have adopted Christianity. They seldom come into contact with the hill-dwellers and live in an entirely different ecological and cultural environment from the latter.¹⁴

Lowland Garos have long been in contact with Bengali life-styles, language and religions (Islam and Hinduism); the natural environment (and climate) of the plains require different agricultural methods, hence a different style of living, eating, and dressing; and, as we shall later see, the political status of the two regions had also diverged long before Partition. The lowland Garo kinship system also shows some remarkable differences from that of the hill Garos. While, for example, lowlanders primarily resort to their *mahari* or *ma'chong* (matrilineal kin group) titles, hill Garos use either 'Marak' or 'Sangma'.¹⁵ Unlike before, when property would be passed on from mothers to daughters, Garo women have begun to divide their property amongst both daughters and sons.

At present, the segmentation into (Indian) hill Garos and (Bangladeshi) lowland Garos is also reflected in the names they give themselves. Bangladeshi Garos generally identify themselves as 'Mandi', which literally means 'human being', while they refer to the Indian hill Garos as 'A'chik' meaning 'hill person'. I prefer to use the name 'Garos' or 'Bangladeshi Garos'. To outsiders (both national and international) they are simply known as Garos, a name which encompasses the

¹² But see for example Robbins Burling, *The Strong Women of Modhupur* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997).

¹³ A. Playfair, *The Garos* (Gauhati and Calcutta: United Publishers [1909] 1975), p.59.

¹⁴ Chie Nakane, *Garo and Khasi. A Comparative Study in Matrilineal Systems* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1967), pp.21–2.

¹⁵ Garos are primarily divided into these two exogamous groups. A third group is Momin, but in Bangladesh they are very few in number.

larger imagined community that includes the hill Garos from across the border in India.¹⁶

Unlike nearly 90 percent of the 150 million Bangladeshis who are Bengali Muslims, the Garos (and other so-called 'tribal' communities) are neither Bengali by ethnicity and culture nor Muslim by religion. According to the population census of 1991 these 'other people of Bangladesh',¹⁷ numbering 1.2 million, made up approximately one percent of all Bangladeshis.¹⁸ There is no recent information about the ethnic constitution of Bangladeshis and it is unclear how many different ethnic groups there are (though estimates range from 20 to 56).

Amongst the Garos of Bangladesh we may broadly distinguish four categories on the basis of habitat. The large majority reside in the most northern fringe of what used to be called Greater Mymensingh, bordering the Indian state of Meghalaya. A second category (some 15 percent) live in the Modhupur forest. A third segment are those who in the years after the Partition of 1947 moved to the tea estates and *pan* plantations in Sylhet (north-eastern Bangladesh, bordering the Khasi Hills in India). The fourth, ever-growing sub-section are those Garos who migrated to the larger towns and cities such as Mymensingh, Dhaka and Chittagong. In the following analysis, I concentrate on the lowland Garos of northern Mymensingh's borderland.

Constructing Notions of a Garo Land

Until the early nineteenth century, the various rulers of Bengal showed little interest in northern Mymensingh and its population. The Mughal rulers had adopted a policy of non-interference and did not intervene in the management of the string of frontier estates on the border of the inaccessible hill areas which bounded the north-eastern part of Bengal. And the British, who replaced the Mughals in the late eighteenth century, continued on the same line, leaving northern Mymensingh in the hands of local landlords (referred to as *zamindars*, *choudries* or *rajas*). This *laissez-faire* stance ended, however, after the local peasantry took up arms against *zamindari* exploitation in 1824–25 and again in 1833—the Pagol Panthi uprisings. The unrest prompted the colonial government to react. It suppressed the rebellious peasants and broke the powerful position of the local *zamindars* in the region. Nevertheless,

¹⁶ Robbins Burling chose to use 'Mandi' instead. Unlike me he noticed some resentment against the name Garo. Burling, *The Strong Women of Modhupur*, pp.3–4.

¹⁷ Cf. Willem van Schendel and Ellen Bal, 'Beyond the "Tribal" Mind-Set: Studying Non-Bengali Peoples in Bangladesh and West Bengal', in Georg Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera (eds), *Contemporary Societies: Tribal Studies. Volume V: Concept of Tribal Society* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 2002), pp.121–39.

¹⁸ It should be noted that some 10–12 percent of the population are Hindu Bengalis (or Bengali Hindus).

power relations in this part of Bengal remained unsettled for many years to come. Only when the British government laid down an official boundary along the foot of the hills in 1869 and brought an end to the collection of rents and cesses in the hills, did conflict between the *zamindars* and the hill Garos stop.¹⁹ Three years later, in 1872, the Garo Hills were officially incorporated into the British Empire.²⁰

Numerous nineteenth-century administrative reports make reference to the 'unruly and fierce hill Garos', but information about nineteenth-century northern Mymensingh is scarce. The few available documents paint a picture of a 'backward' region of great linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Apart from Bengali-speaking people, colonial reports mention Hajongs, Koches, Banais, Dalus, Hodies, Rajbansis, and Garos.²¹ Yet while ethnic and communal differences increasingly came to characterise inter-group relations in the twentieth century, these did not seem to play any significant role earlier. The Pagol Panthi movement, for instance, had attracted peasants from various religious, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It had been class-based, organised against *zamindari* suppression and the colonial state on the basis of a shared experience of exploitation.²²

The Five Thanas of the Partially Excluded Area

The relative 'administrative invisibility' of northern Mymensingh came to an end in 1936, when the British converted it into a regular district. However the five northernmost *thanas*²³ or administrative units of Mymensingh were partially excluded from this administrative reorganisation and placed under the direct control of the governor of Bengal. They remained under Mymensingh District, but no provincial or state act could be applied until approved by the governor, who was thus allowed to directly interfere in any local situation. In 1938 a new revenue settlement was commissioned which produced the first really informative and extensive official document on the area.²⁴ Its author R.W. Bastin nevertheless ventured into sensitive

¹⁹ The Revenue Survey of Mymensingh (1857) demarcated the northern boundary of Mymensingh along the foot of the Garo Hills. The Sherpur and Shushong *zamindars* stated that this line did not represent the northern boundary of their estates and the Shushong *zamindar* took the matter to the local Revenue and Civil Courts and next to the High Court. Although he finally lost the battle, he did receive financial compensation for his loss. The 1869 Act, which came into effect in 1870, asserted the boundary between Mymensingh and the Garo Hills. See *General Administration Report of the Garo Hills District for the Year 1875–76* (Simla: Government Central Branch Press, 1876).

²⁰ For the process of consolidation of British administration in the hills, see for instance Jayanta Bhushan Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English 1765–1874* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1978), pp.182–228; and Parimal Chandra Kar, *British Annexation of the Garo Hills* (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1970), pp.42–77.

²¹ Willem van Schendel, "'Madmen' of Mymensingh: Peasant Resistance and the Colonial Process in Eastern India, 1824–1833", in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.XXII, no.2 (1985), p.151.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The area comprised the five northern *thanas* (administrative units, or police stations) of Mymensingh: Sribarddi, Nalitabari, Haluaghat, Durgapur, and Kalmakanda.

²⁴ R.W. Bastin, *Final Report of the Settlement Operations in Five Thanas of Partially Excluded Area of Mymensingh 1938–42* (Dacca: East Bengal Government Press, 1954).

political territory when he argued that their lack of sophistication and education placed these 'simple tribals' at a disadvantage in dealing with the cleverer and better-educated Bengalis.²⁵

Why did the government suddenly bother about this 'peripheral' region after a long period of disinterest? Close reading of Bastin's report reveals one reason—the good 'working relation' that had been established between the colonial government and local Christian missionary societies. Missionaries had been proselytising in Bengal since the sixteenth century—with little success. Then in the second half of the nineteenth century, '[a] vast new field...opened in Garo land'. There, the missionaries decided, 'there was hope of making an appreciable number of converts'.²⁶ And so it proved. The Garos converted in their thousands. Interestingly, though, the low-caste Hindu minorities in this same part of Bengal (the Hodies, Hajongs, Koches, Banais, etc.) showed no interest in conversion. Therefore the missionaries were very protective of 'their Garo field'.

The partial exclusion of the five *thanas* served both parties. The poverty and indebtedness of the Garos pricked the consciences of the missionaries, since 'there was the obvious fact that a chronically destitute Catholic is a poor advertisement for the Church in this land where wealth and health are regarded generally as positive marks of divine favour'.²⁷ Also the government and the missionaries had a common interest in dampening down anti-colonial agitation, and the government believed that missionary influence had prevented the Indian nationalist movement from establishing a stronghold among the Garos and deterred them from taking part in any of the peasant struggles stirred up by Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement.²⁸

Constructing Notions of a Garo Homeland in Bengal

The decision to partially exclude the five northern *thanas* of Mymensingh brought not only a number of practical opportunities for the local population such as

²⁵ Another reason applied especially to the Garos, who formed the majority of the so-called aboriginals. Their matrilineal system positioned them adversely since, according to Bastin, it did not give men any incentive to work. *Ibid.*, pp.123–4.

²⁶ Edmund N. Goedert, *Holy Cross Priests in the Diocese of Dacca 1853–1981* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Province Archive Center, 1983), p.16.

²⁷ *The Bengalese*, Vol.XIV, no.9 (Oct. 1933), p.13.

²⁸ For example in 1930, the Baptist newsletter *Our Bond* proudly mentioned that *Swarajists* were unsuccessful with the Garos: 'It is evident that the Garo people have no doubts as to whether they want *Swaraj* [Self-Rule] or not. The other day an old man said, "While the English live we live; when they die, we die with them." The youthful courageous Gandhi followers have failed in all their attempts to hold *hartals* [general strikes], and arouse the non-co-operative spirit among them. An amusing tale is told of how, a few weeks ago, a number of young braves saw the mighty host of Garos in all their war paint approaching them, they fled for life and nothing more was heard of their four days' *hartal*'. *Our Bond*, Vol.XXXVI, no.1 (January 1930), p.8.

education, funding-schemes, health-care, etc., it also provided the Garos with a clear conception of a separate Garo homeland in Bengal. Interestingly, though, none of the other local minorities managed to organise themselves collectively as well as the Garos did. As a result the Hodies, Mandis, and Banais are now all reduced in numbers, scattered and mired in poverty.²⁹

On the eve of Partition, the PEA came to play a central role in the attempts of a number of politically-active lowland Garos, the self-styled A'chik Shongho,³⁰ to have their 'homeland' included in India. They wanted, in the words of former A'chik Shongho general secretary Arun Gagra, 'that our PEA should be amalgamated with Assam. We didn't want to remain in Pakistan because we have most social similarity with the hill people'.³¹ The A'chik Shongho members raised money to send a 'Garo delegation' to Calcutta to meet members of the Partition Boundary Commission—but only lowland Garos took part. Monendra, one of its members, recalls:

We sent our demands to the commissioner of the Division Committee. Radcliffe³² was in charge of this area. He was in Calcutta, so we went there to meet the committee . . . There was a lawyer who dealt with the objections about the Partition. We met him and he listened very carefully. He tried his best but did not manage to settle the matter. Radcliffe said that this was a very small area without a special boundary, so it was not possible to attach the area to India.³³

The story is confirmed by an unpublished report of members of the Boundary Commission. Two of its Muslim members wrote:

A claim has been made on behalf of a minor non-Muslim organization that the non-Muslim portion of the Partially Excluded Areas located on the northern side of Mymensingh district in East Bengal should be excluded from East Bengal and added to the Garo Hills area of Assam. The main ground for this claim is that this area is inhabited

²⁹ Elsewhere I show that the introduction of Christianity facilitated the organisation and unification of the lowland Garos. See Bal, *'They Ask If We Eat Frogs': Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh*, Chap. 7.

³⁰ Although the name suggests the inclusion of hill Garos (A'chik), the organisation only had lowland Garo or Mandi members.

³¹ Personal interview with Arun Gagra by Suborno Chisim and author.

³² Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer, was appointed in 1947 as the chairman of the two Boundary Committees that partitioned the British Imperial territory of India.

³³ Personal interview with Monendra by Suborno Chisim and author.

by tribes who have not much in common with the residents of the remaining part of East Bengal, but have racial, social, and economic ties with the tribes inhabiting the Garo Hills.³⁴

But the bid failed. On 15 August 1947, the Garos of Bengal became citizens of the newly-established Dominion of Pakistan. The Boundary Commission had found no reason to take the Garo claim into consideration.³⁵ Nevertheless, their territorial link with the PEA continued to play a vital role in the self-perception of the Garos.

Unwelcome in East Pakistan

According to the 1951 census, only some 40,000 Garos lived within the borders of East Pakistan. Documentation about the Mymensingh border during the first months after Partition is scarce, and only a few elderly Garos have any clear recollections of the period. Yet it seems that, compared to other parts of the Bengal borderland, this area remained relatively undisturbed for some years to come.

Slowly, however, the Garos were confronted with the fact that they had become a tiny minority in an overwhelmingly Muslim, Bengali-dominated society. At the same time, the cosy relationship between the Christian missionaries and the state was severed. While the missionaries had been in a relatively influential position earlier, they now were confronted with a suspicious state—despite their efforts to demonstrate a pro-Pakistan attitude.³⁶ In 1952, three criminal cases were filed against foreign Catholic missionaries in Haluaghat and Durgapur accusing them of forcing Muslim converts (Garos) to return to Christianity.³⁷

³⁴ Mr. Justice A.S.M. Akram and Mr. Justice S.A. Rahman, 'Report of Muslim Members', 28 July 1947, in 'Reports of Members of the Boundary Commission', India Office Library Archives, London.

³⁵ Justices Akram and Rahman wrote: 'No part of the Province of Bengal can be tagged on to an area outside the Province. Secondly, the Partially Excluded Areas are really five thanas in the Mymensingh district which are Muslim majority thanas. They are contiguous to the main Muslim majority block, and therefore hardly any justification exists for excluding any part of them from East Bengal'. *Ibid.*

³⁶ For instance on 23 March 1950, a Catholic procession was held in Mymensingh town. Two thousand Garos had come to Mymensingh to join the procession: '[t]he Garos—men, women, and children—formed a procession and, carrying the banners of their sodalities [*sic*] and the Papal flag and that of Pakistan, marched to the station reciting the rosary and singing'. Raymond C. Clancy, *The Congregation of Holy Cross in East Bengal, 1853–1953. In Three Parts with a Brief History of the Church in Bengal. Volume II* (Holy Cross Foreign Mission Seminary, Washington DC: unpublished manuscript, 1953), p.341.

³⁷ The Archbishop of Dhaka came in person to see the chief secretary to the Government of East Bengal. He was of the opinion that the members of his mission had been harassed unnecessarily. The district magistrate commented: 'These cases are the result of the Christian Missionaries' trying to get back to their religion the few aboriginals who have recently embraced Islam, by threat, intimidation and use of force. Surely we cannot tolerate this'. 'The Christian Missionaries Must Forget Their Old Mission Raj in the Partially Excluded Area', letter to M.A. Majid (29 March 1952), File E-6 1952, *Home B Proceedings. Government of East Bengal*, List 118 Bundle 70. I thank Willem van Schendel for drawing my attention to these cases.

Although the sparse data (occasional interview fragments, missionary documents, and administrative notes) suggest that the situation in the border area remained comparatively calm, life never returned to what it had been before Partition. Fear and insecurity became a constant factor in the lives of Bengal's Garos. An elder Garo informant told us that 'after the Partition we knew that it would become difficult for non-Muslim people to live in East Pakistan. The leaders of the Muslim League spoke openly that everyone in East Pakistan had to become Muslim, or leave the country'.

1964: The Great Exodus

At the beginning of 1964, northern Mymensingh witnessed a sudden influx of Bengali refugees from Assam, followed by Bengalis from other parts of Mymensingh (such as Gafargaon, Kishorganj, Trisal, and Nandail). Although the inflow had begun in 1963, it increased dramatically in early 1964 when India and East Pakistan witnessed new outbursts of communal violence.³⁸ In the wake of these riots, East Pakistan took in more than a million Muslim refugees from the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam.³⁹

The arrival of Bengali newcomers coincided with thievery and intimidation of the local non-Muslim population and with illegal settlements on their lands. Rumours rapidly spread throughout the border area that more Bengalis would come to rape and kill. Within one month, almost all the Garos from the border area had fled (with the exception of the people from Durgapur *thana*). Haluaghat *thana*, where I conducted most of my field research, was seriously affected by the disturbances. Villagers' stories tell of an influx of Muslim Bengali refugees from India; the arrival of landless Muslim Bengalis from other places in East Pakistan; illegal occupations; illegal settlements on the land of local non-Muslim people; robbery; the spread of rumours; and intimidation (with a strong communal flavour) by the newly-arrived Bengalis, local Bengalis, and representatives of the state (East Pakistan Rifles, paramilitary Ansars, and police).

When news reached the villagers that the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) had been shooting at the Garos fleeing across the border, the villagers gathered on the Catholic mission compound and decided to leave. Within one day, on 5 February 1964, almost all the Garos left—leaving behind the Muslim Bengalis. A Garo informant recounted the events of the day:

³⁸ See for example: A.F.M. Kamaluddin, 'Refugee Problems in Bangladesh,' in L.A. Kosinski and K. Maudood Elahi (eds.), *Population Redistribution and Development in South Asia* (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985), p.222; and James J. Novak, *Bangladesh. Reflections on the Water* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1994), p.91.

³⁹ See Kamaluddin, 'Refugee Problems in Bangladesh', p.222.

The next day, we found all surrounding houses and villages occupied by [Bengali] refugees. Not a single house was left unoccupied. The same day, Bengalis from Trisal, Nandail, Kishorganj and Gafargaon arrived by buses and trucks. I don't know how they got the news so quickly. The whole day they continued to arrive.

In India, the Garo refugees were housed in camps. Conditions were bad. Many people fell ill and died. Local Garos encouraged the refugees to stay, and both missionaries and the Indian government took steps to rehabilitate them and provided financial support. Nevertheless, many did not want to stay in India. After two or three months, people started, slowly and hesitantly, to return. The newsletter 'Chronicles of Biroidakuni Mission' reported: 'there is a state of restlessness very noticeable in those who have returned to stay and in those who went back to the hills. They seem to be going in circles'.⁴⁰ Our informants provided several reasons for this behaviour. They wanted to escape the dire conditions in the camps but many also wanted to return to the place they considered home: 'It was our motherland, and we had lands here. That is why we came back'.

Garos refer to the 1963–64 events as a conscious attempt by the Pakistan government, in the words of one informant, 'to drive the tribals out of this area'. 'After the eviction of the Hajongs (in 1950) they now wanted to kick out the Garos'. Another Garo contended that the government had been behind the lootings and suppression of the Garos and other minorities in the border area. Available documents support the suggestion that state agencies, such as the East Pakistan Rifles, the paramilitary Ansar, and the police played an active role in the suppression and intimidation of the Garos and that the leniency of the central government allowed the situation to escalate. For example, after a visit to the border area, the Archbishop of Dhaka wrote in his yearly Easter message in March 1964:

I was aware of the danger long ago, and I warned the Government of what was likely to happen if strict measures were not taken to stop these injustices. Unfortunately, my warnings were not heeded. I have spent a great deal of time during these months in the border area, trying to keep our people from going away. You would not believe that such things could happen in such a short time.⁴¹

⁴⁰ In November of that year, the 'Chronicles of Biroidakuni Mission' estimated that half of the Catholic population of Biroidakuni (Garos) had returned but after that month the 'Chronicles' stop reporting. Our interviews revealed that Garos continued to come back in the following year too. There are no final figures about returnees available. 'Chronicles of Biroidakuni Mission' (5 July, 25 Oct., and 10–30 Nov. 1964).

⁴¹ 'Archbishop's Easter Message', *Protibeshi*, Vol.11 (29 Mar. 1964), p.3. See also 'Chronicles of Biroidakuni Mission' (28 Jan. 1964).

Remarkably in light of these atrocities, the Pakistan government finally invited the Garos to return—literally called on them to do so through loudspeakers installed on the border. This sudden change in state attitude was probably caused by international pressure. On other levels, however, a more aggressive state attitude towards the non-Muslim population of northern Mymensingh developed after 1964. For example the ‘Enemy Property Ordinance’ ruled that the property of Indian nationals and East Pakistanis residing in India was forfeit to the Pakistan government. People who had their lands declared ‘Enemy Property’ were forced to spend a great deal of money on court cases. Meanwhile lands belonging to non-returnees were occupied by Bengalis, whether illegally or under the ordinance. It has been argued that the law was strategically (mis)used against all non-Muslim inhabitants of East Pakistan (and later of Bangladesh).⁴²

After 1965, foreign missionaries were no longer allowed to work in the border area. In practice, this meant that particularly the Garos of Mymensingh (living in a borderland) lost their support. Contemporary Garos often point to 1964 as the turning point between good and bad times, between the days when they were left to themselves and the days of Bengali Muslim domination. Only then did all the Garos put aside their differences and come to realise that they were one and the same people. An informant recalled:

In 1964, the Mandi [i.e., Garo] people got in trouble for the first time. These problems were the same for all groups and everyone had to flee to India. During those days, all Mandis became united. They realised that they were the same people. Since then they have not cared about who is an Atong or a Megam. Before that, we maintained no relationships with Megam and Atong.⁴³

The Garos of Bangladesh

After East Pakistan’s Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won the elections that should have made him prime minister of Pakistan, the Pakistan Army went into action. On the

⁴² The Enemy Property Ordinance was the result of the 17-day war between India and Pakistan in 1964. The properties were to be returned after the war. Yet the State of War ended officially only with Bangladesh’s independence in 1971. This meant that the property of Garo refugees were also declared ‘Enemy Property’. In 1974, the Bangladesh government confirmed it as the ‘Vested and Non-Resident Property (Administration) Act (XLVI)’. Officially no new names were to be added after 1974, but in reality the law continued to be applied until 1991. See R.W. Timm, *The Adivasis of Bangladesh* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1991), p.21.

⁴³ The lowland Garos used to be divided into several localised groups such as the Atong, Chibok, Abeng, and Kochu, who spoke their own dialects or language. Some groups maintained close relations with one another but between others contacts (including marriage) were rare or even absent. These days, the significance of these groups is very small.

night of 26 March 1971, a nine-month war began in which between 300,000 and 1 million East Pakistanis died. In December, when the Pakistan Army surrendered, a free Bangladesh emerged. People like the Garos, who also joined the freedom struggle, shared the hopes and dreams of that moment. However soon after the birth of Bangladesh they discovered that they were not regarded as ideal citizens. Therefore with memories of 1964 fresh in their minds, the Garos decided to leave before the border area turned into a war zone. Even so, the Garos were forced to run the gauntlet of hostile Bengali Muslims and, as soon as they left, their houses were occupied by Bengalis. Looting started with the Pakistan Army's arrival. Within months, Muslim Bengalis were joining the Garos in the refugee camps across the border.

Many young Garos from Mymensingh joined the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Force). A recent inventory of freedom fighters from Haluaghat *thana* lists 330 names, of which more than one third (118) were local Garos.⁴⁴ Other 'tribals' from northern Mymensingh, such as Koches, Banais, and Hajongs, also joined the 'freedom fighters'. One former (Garo) freedom fighter remembers a meeting with the Bangladesh government-in-exile at which they had been asked to join the war:

The Garo leaders asked them what advantages they would be getting after the war. The reply was that all demands would be fulfilled. After several meetings [however] the Garos had still not managed to agree on the demands. They were politically divided.

The actual recruitment of volunteers took place in the refugee camps. Arthur, one of our Garo informants, explained how he had felt the excitement vibrating in the air and how this encouraged him to join the Mukti Bahini: 'We joined the freedom fighters for no other reasons than other people; it was quite emotional'. At the same time he was also dreaming of a better future:

We wanted an independent country. We had been exploited by the Pakistanis. We wanted to live in this country with the dignity of citizens of a free country. In those days they [Pakistanis] did not recruit the *adivasis* [tribals] in their army or in the police force; they totally ignored the *adivasis*. Another thing was that we wanted to prove our feelings for the country, that we also loved this country. We wanted to show that we were also citizens of this country.

⁴⁴ See Mymensingh Jila Trust, *71-er Proshikkon Shibirer Pramanyo Dolil* (Authentic Documents of the Training Camps of '71) (Mymensingh: Mymensingh Jila Trust, n.d.).

In December 1971 with the aid of the Indian Army, Bangladesh became an independent country. Many Garos now felt it was safe to return. But what, exactly, were they returning to?

During their stay in the camps in India, many Garos pondered this question. Yet few could agree on a plan of action. The Garos left for Bangladesh without having even an agreed list of demands, let alone an arrangement with the new government of Bangladesh for their rehabilitation. And when they finally reached their former houses they found the destruction of property far worse than in 1964.⁴⁵ Moreover it soon became clear that Sheikh Mujib favoured the creation of a state based on Bengali ethnicity, and had no intention of turning Bangladesh into a multi-ethnic country:

Some Garos went to see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They told him: 'We are tribals so we need special care from the government'. They presented him *millam-spie* [Garo shield and sword] as a souvenir. Sheikh Mujib said to them: 'All people here are Bengali'. The Garos told him that they needed special protection, but he refused. He told us that we are Bengalis, and said 'You do not need any special privileges'.

In 1973, Sheikh Mujib stated that the ethnic minorities would be promoted to the status of Bengali, and in 1974 parliament passed a bill that declared Bangladesh a 'uni-cultural and uni-linguistic nation-state'.⁴⁶

Urged by the new state leaders to think of themselves as Bengalis, the Garos instead developed a counter discourse in which they presented themselves as the Garos (or Mandis) of Bangladesh. In this way they retained their identity as a distinct ethnic community, different from Bengali Muslims (or Muslim Bengalis), but one rooted in the new country of Bangladesh. In other words, the very dominant state ideology which excluded the Garos from the 'nation' resulted in a firmer demarcation between Garos and others—not as outsiders but as full-fledged citizens.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cf. Burling, *Strong Women of Modhupur*, p.69.

⁴⁶ Lamia Karim, 'Pushed to the Margins: Adivasi Peoples in Bangladesh and the Case of Kalpana Chakma,' in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol.VII, no.3 (1998), p.307 (emphasis added). See also Rita Manchanda, 'Crisis of Minority Rights in South Asia', in *South Asian Journal* Vol.XIII, Jul.–Sept. 2006 [http://www.southasianmedia.net/Magazine/Journal/13_crisis-of-minority.htm]

⁴⁷ See also Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff and Ellen Bal, 'De-Partitioning Society: Contesting Borders of the Mind in Bangladesh and India', in Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari (eds), *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts* (New Delhi and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), pp.75–97.

Concluding Remarks

These days, the Garos of Bangladesh form a close-knit community with a strong Garo identity. In dominant (insiders' and outsiders') discourse the articulation of the ethnic boundary between the Garos and others is taken for granted and deemed a remnant of the past, although historical data to substantiate or refute that idea are scarce. During my research among the Garos of Bangladesh I learned that until a few decades ago, the differences between lowlanders and hill Garos (generally attributed to the lowlanders' contacts with Bengalis and the different lifestyles required in a lowland environment) were not the only differences among all those people labelled Garo. According to many of my elderly informants, the lowland Garos developed a strong ethnic identity only in the course of the twentieth century.

Various factors contributed to the process of Garo ethnogenesis such as Christianity and conversion, globalisation, contemporary debates on indigenous peoples, and incorporation into a modern state and market economy. However, I have focused here primarily on the role of the Bengali state, and its continuous policies to 'other' or exclude the Garos from full participation in the country. On the basis of a discussion of three different episodes in the lives of the Garos, I have specified the role that state policies have played in the process of identity formation amongst the lowland Garos.

The colonial (and also the Christian missionary) suggestions that the Garos and neighbouring vulnerable 'tribes' needed special protection resulted in the partial territorial separation of the northern part of Mymensingh and incidentally in the creation of a separate 'Garo homeland'. It should be noted however that these colonial notions of pluralism, which were rooted in 'existing ideas of hierarchy that find expression in prejudices shaping everyday encounters between peoples who see each other as fundamentally different because of the persistence of old stereotypes',⁴⁸ did not lead to their total exclusion from the state. It was different after 1947. Successive power-holders in Pakistan and Bangladesh availed themselves alternately of religion (Islam) and ethnicity (Bengali-ness) as the most important ingredient of their national discourses and images of their ideal-type citizens.⁴⁹ In Pakistan notions of true citizenship based on a shared Islamic identity resulted in the (forceful) exclusion of the 'other' (non-Muslims) as outsiders. And as for the

⁴⁸ Charles Keyes, 'Presidential Address: "The Peoples of Asia"—Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China and Vietnam', in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.61, no.4 (Nov. 2002), p.1193.

⁴⁹ Cf. Willem van Schendel, 'Who Speaks for the Nation? Nationalist Rethoric and the Challenge of Cultural Pluralism in Bangladesh' in Erik-Jan Zürcher and Willem van Schendel (eds), *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). Also see Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd.), 1997.

promise of an 'inclusive' Bangladeshi nation-state in 1971—that was short-lived. Sheikh Mujib—although eager to keep religion out of politics—was determined that the new state should have an essentially Bengali identity. These two discourses on national identity (based on an Islamic identity or on Bengali-ness) have continued to dominate the Bangladeshi national discourse. Until this day no significant conceptions of Bangladesh as a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-religious nation-state have developed.

Especially since 1971, the Garos of Bangladesh have developed into a self-conscious community. They have given priority to educating their children. Many are studying in colleges and universities. Others have found jobs in national and international businesses and governmental and non-governmental organisations. Today, more than ever before, they also demand a voice. Yet until the minorities in Bangladesh are made to feel that they are also equal citizens of the state, they will never experience a true sense of security. This being the case, there remains a possibility that the Garos might seek to protect themselves through a further strengthening of their ethnic identity—by further sealing the mental boundaries between self and 'other'.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For similar observations see for example Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, *Tyranny of Partition: Hindus in Bangladesh and Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Gyan Publications, 2006), p.136.